

Grant Wood was born on a farm in Iowa in 1891. After high school he studied in the United States and Europe and developed an interest in Impressionism. But while working on a commission in Germany in 1928, Wood had a chance to see paintings by early German and Flemish masters, sending his own work into a new, more realistic and more American direction. One of his first paintings in this new style was *American Gothic*, which he exhibited in 1930 to much acclaim. Among the most iconic and recognizable images in American art, it helped propel Wood to fame and launch the Regionalist movement, of which Wood became the de facto spokesperson. Wood spent the rest of his life working on his own art as well as teaching others. He died in 1942.

Grant Wood was born on his parents' farm outside of Anamosa, Iowa, on February 13, 1891. These idyllic settings would leave a lasting impression on Wood and profoundly influence his later thinking and work, though he would spend much of his life after the age of 10 in the relatively more urban settings of Cedar Rapids, where his mother moved Wood and his younger sister Nan after their father died.

Wood developed his interest in art while still in grammar school and showed promise. He continued to nurture his talents in high school—where he also designed sets for plays and illustrated student publications—and after graduation in 1910 attended the Minneapolis School of Design and Handicraft. Over the next few years Wood further expanded his creative repertoire by learning to work with metal and jewelry as well as build furniture. When he moved to Chicago in 1913, he used these skills to make a living.

In Chicago, Wood spent his days at his jewelry and metalworking shop and his evenings developing his talents through correspondence courses and classes at the Art Institute. However, when his mother fell ill in 1916, Wood left Chicago for Cedar Rapids, where he took a job as a grammar school teacher to support her and his sister. However, his familial obligations did not stop Wood from continuing to make progress as an artist. As such, several years later a local department store held an exhibition that included several of his paintings and led to further commissions.

During the 1920s, Wood was also able to find a way to travel to Europe, visiting the museums of France and Italy, studying at the Académie Julian and exhibiting his work in Paris. He returned from these trips profoundly inspired by the Impressionists, whose pastoral subject matter spoke to his own sensibilities.

#### American Gothic

However, it would be on a 1928 trip to Munich, Germany—where he was overseeing the production of a stained glass window he had designed for the Veterans Memorial Building in Cedar Rapids—that Wood had the revelation that ultimately changed the direction of his art and propelled him to fame. After seeing the works of 15th- and 16th-century German and Flemish masters, whose realism and attention to detail bowled him over, Wood returned to the United States determined to integrate their approach into his own work.

Abandoning his earlier Impressionistic leanings, Wood began to formulate a more realistic style through which to convey the rural subject matter he'd held dear since his youth. One of his first paintings from this period is also his most famous: *American Gothic*. Showing a farmer (modeled after Wood's dentist) and a woman who is either his wife or daughter (modeled after Wood's sister) standing stoically in front of a white farmhouse, *American Gothic* was exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1930 and won immediate acclaim. It has since become one of the most recognizable images in the history of U.S. art. At times interpreted as parody, according to Wood the work is in fact intended as an affirmation of its distinctly Midwestern subject matter and implied values, standing apart from those of large American cities and, even more so, European culture.

With his paintings of small-town life, Midwestern landscapes and historical scenes, Wood became the de facto spokesperson for the American Regionalist movement. His paintings were much in demand. Besides *American Gothic*, other representative works include *Woman With Plants* (1929), *The Appraisal* (1931) and *Daughters of Revolution* (1932).

In 1932, Wood used his newly won fame to co-found the Stone City Colony and Art School, where he could spread the message of Regionalism to aspiring artists. Two years later, however, he accepted a position with the art department at the University of Iowa, where he believed he could have an even greater impact. That same year, Wood was also named director of the Public Works of Art Project in Iowa and was featured in a *Time* magazine cover story about Regionalism. In 1935 he published the essay "Revolt Against the City," in which he laid out the tenets of the movement.

Despite these successes, Wood was about to enter the most trying period in his life. In 1935, he rather suddenly married a woman named Sara Maxon, with whom he would maintain a difficult relationship for the next few years in part because of his latent homosexuality. Wood and Maxon ultimately divorced in 1939, at a time when he was also in trouble with the IRS for tax evasion.

Meanwhile, Wood's professional world was coming apart as well. With the rise of abstract movements in American art, Wood's Regionalism was falling out of favor and put him at odds with many of the faculty at the university. Frustrated, in 1940 Wood took a leave of absence.

Throughout this trying time, however, Wood had continued to work. Paintings such as *Death on Ridge Road* (1935), *Parson Weems' Fable* (1939) and *Iowa Cornfield* (1941) all show his faithful adherence to the American art movement he was primarily responsible for founding. He died of cancer on February 12, 1942, at age 50, and was buried on his family's plot in Anamosa.